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The practical turn: towards a pragmatist philosophy of history.

Rik Peters, University of Groningen

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Introduction

As announced in the abstract, this paper seeks to overcome the current fragmentation in the philosophy of history by establishing a relationship between historical experience, historical writing, and action. In this context, this paper looks both back and forward. Looking back, it connects to a long tradition in the philosophy of history, which saw history as thought and action.¹ Looking forward, this paper reinterprets this tradition from a pragmatist point of view, that is, it tries to do justice to historical practice. Recognizing that time is short today, I will frame my paper in 4 theses which I will briefly flesh out.

Before I start, however, I want to make clear that by choosing the label pragmatism for my position, I do not subscribe to any particular philosophical movement. Though some pragmatist ideas have been helpful, I have developed the main argument in practice. First, as a consultant in many profit and non profit organizations, and next, as a lecturer in the course 'learning histories and organizations' at the University of Groningen. In this course, Frank Ankersmit, Jaap den Hollander and myself have trained students of history to apply their knowledge and skills to help organizations to learn from the past. So far we have applied this method in more than 70 organizations, varying from very small ones to very big ones, like Philips and the Dutch Tax Administration.² In the course we have used many historical theories, varying from hermeneutics and narrativism to systems theory. By testing these theories in practice, we have gradually developed a workable synthesis which we offer to the students. I will now give you a short summary in 4 theses and show what they mean in the context of learning histories.

1. In order to understand the relationship between historical experience and action, historical practice should be studied from the inside. On this point, I explicitly connect to classic philosophers of history like Droysen, Dilthey, Croce, Gentile, Collingwood and Oakeshott, and Ortega y Gasset. In contrast to most contemporary philosophers of history, many of these philosophers were not only active as historians, but also politicians and as political thinkers. With regard to applying history thought to action, therefore, they were not outsiders, but insiders. Accordingly, their philosophies of history were not refined contemplations of finished products, varying from monuments to narratives, but reflections on the function of history for life, as they called it, or on historical practice, as I will call it.

¹ Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action. The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood*, Imprint Academic, Exeter, (will appear at the end of 2013)

² L. Karsten, R.G.P Peters, D.B.R. Kroeze, S.J. Keulen, 'Leadership style and entrepreneurial change: the Centurion operation at Philips Electronics,' in: *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 22, 1, (2009) pp. 73-92; Rik Peters en Jaap den Hollander, 'De positie van de inspecteur in de Belastingdienst 1980-2010' in: *Informatief maart* 2012, pp. 5-10.

Now, the most important thing to be learned from the insider's point of view, is that there is no clear separation between historical experience, historical method, and historical writing. From the insider's perspective all these are aspects of a single practice which comprises all. Most importantly, there is no breach between historical practice and action. Historical experience and historical writing are part and parcel of action; we study the past in function of the present. In terms of the classic philosophers of history, historical research and writing is 'atto in atto', 'act in action', or 'enactment'. For learning historians, this theory is a fact of life; every single moment they experience that there is no clear dividing line between themselves and the organizations they study; indeed, the very fact that they study the past of organizations, is already an intervention in the organization. Or to say it in solemn philosophical words: in learning histories subject and object are one.

2. The notion of historical experience should be broadened

When we agree with the classical philosophers that history is an integral part of life, we must also acknowledge that there are many ways to 'relate to the past'.³ From this point of view, sublime historical experiences, like trauma or nostalgia, are only extreme cases of relating to the past. In daily life, and that is what counts for a pragmatist, there are many other ways of 'relating to the past' such as memory, surprise, and most importantly, action itself: in action we relate past and present with a view on the and future. Moreover, experience should not be limited to the non-linguistic realm; if an old painting by Guardi, or Rococo ornaments can 'move' us to having an historical experience⁴, why can't a video, speech, or indeed, a historical narrative? Moreover, if we listen to a song, we do not only experience the music, but the music in relation to the text which clearly shows that the distinction between the non-linguistic and the linguistic is not helpful for understanding experience as a whole. On this basis, we teach our learning historians that in the daily life organizations for example, people not only cherish old furniture, paintings, flags, but also experience the past in speeches, and videos. For learning historians it is silly to leave linguistic expressions of the experiences of the past aside; it would limit the range of their sources too much, and thus considerably decrease the learning outcome of their histories.

3. Historical representations can be seen as expressions of historical experience.

How can we connect experience to narrative? This is an important question, because, in the theory of history, historical experience and narrative have so far been studied separately. Even Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit, who have greatly contributed to both fields, have not yet elaborated a synthesis between them. Moreover, focusing on the sublime, these two thinkers have stressed the passive side of historical experience at the cost of its active side. In this context, pragmatic aesthetical theory, which formed the starting point of Ankersmit's theory, can be helpful on two points. First, because it recognizes quite ordinary experiences like hearing a bird's song, or enjoying a meal with friends. Second, it is helpful because it shows us how the bird's song may be developed into an entire symphony or and the experience of the meal with friends into a novel.⁵ Pragmatic aesthetics thus shows us how artists not only passively undergo experiences, but also how they actively elaborate these experiences.

³ Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 2005, xv.

⁴ Ibid., 266-277, 306-312.

⁵ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1934.

Along these lines, the theory of history can be expanded, by showing how historical experience is elaborated into narrative. In his last book, Ankersmit makes a first step in that direction when he discusses 'The Waning of the Middle Ages' as an 'expression' of Huizinga's historical experience.⁶ The classical philosophers of history, would have welcomed this view of the narrative as 'an expression' of historical experience, in fact, it lay at the basis of their own expressivist aesthetics. But for the pragmatist narrative as expression is not good enough. He would stress that art, or in this case historical narrative, must always be understood in the context of the historian's interaction with his environment. From a pragmatist point of view, historical narratives are instruments for action.

4. Historical narratives are instruments for action.

For most historians, this is a most provocative thesis; indeed, most of them simply reject it. In their view, historical narrative degraded to an 'instrument for action' can no longer be factual let alone be objective. Learning historians, however, explicitly declare that their narratives are instruments for action. Narratives which fail to provide 'actionable knowledge' are simply useless. The thesis that historical narratives are instruments for action therefore needs a strong theoretical basis. The starting point here is the pragmatist theory that a judgment is true when it is effective. From this it follows that verification of a judgment lies not in correspondence, nor in coherence, but in future consequences. For example, the judgment 'Sugar is sweet' means that when the sugar is subjected to specific tests, for example, tasting it, certain consequences will follow. Likewise, the judgment 'Water is H₂O' is 'primarily a statement of the conditions under which water comes into existence' and it is 'also a direction for producing pure water and for testing anything that is likely to be taken for water'.⁷

This theory has met severe opposition, on the ground that verification in the future, or reference to the future makes judgements about the past impossible. Not surprisingly, among the most outspoken critics were some renowned historians like Arthur Lovejoy. Their most cogent criticism that a historical judgment, such as 'Jonathan Swift married Stella', does not have any practical consequences. Obviously, this criticism pierces the heart of the pragmatist theory of truth, because if a historical judgement has no practical consequences, it cannot be true in the pragmatist sense.

In order to save the pragmatist theory of truth for history, one could argue that f.e. Fritz Fisher's judgement that Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg and his cabinet planned an large scale attack on Europe in 1913, had enormous practical consequences; it actually deconstructed the myth Germans had believed for more than four decades. But this argument does not away that 'Jonathan Swift did indeed marry Stella is in fact true, even if it has no practical consequences. In short, it is very difficult to apply the pragmatist theory of future reference to descriptive sentences of the past.

A more fruitful defense focuses on historical representations. As Donald Schön argued, the metaphorical representation of a bad quarter in the city as 'a disease' clearly has far-reaching

⁶ Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth and Reference in Historical Representation*, 2012, 204-206.

⁷ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 88.

practical consequences; the metaphor disease frames the problem and therefore also the solution.⁸ Likewise, the representation of a certain period in history as the 'Cold War' has had far-reaching practical consequences; not only did we represent a part of the past with this metaphor, but we literally lived in it. And now that the Cold War has ended, we live as if it belongs to the past. In short, the representation 'Cold War' had serves both as a representation of the past and as a plan for action; it enable people to understand the past in function of the present. Thus, the historical judgement that 'The period from 1949-89 is the Cold War' has been verified on a daily basis. Just like the concept H₂O enables a scientist to test whether a liquid is water, a historical representation 'The End of Cold War' legitimizes our politicians to buy very expensive Joint Strike Fighters, or to build 'Fort Europe' as the EU is currently called. And like H₂O means 'being liquid', 'boils at 100 degrees', 'The End of the Cold War' simply means buying Joint Strike Fighters, or building Fort Europe.

Now people will probably retort that this is an example from recent history. But the theory also applies to earlier periods. Take for example, the Italians. They live in the belief that Renaissance took place in their national history. And indeed, the representation 'Renaissance' still has practical consequences. Not only in the sense that you can find Renaissance art in Italian cities, but also in the deeper sense that the Renaissance forms part of the beliefs upon which Italians act on a daily basis. Likewise, a representations like 'Pericles Athens' still dominate our conceptions of democracy, just as our representation of prehistoric times conditions our view of mankind. In short, historical representations have a strong practical value. This becomes very clear in learning histories. When CEO of the the biggest Dutch Bank framed the situation in 2002 as 'the endgame', he and his managers began to buy many other banks in order to survive the end of times. By now, we all know the consequences.....⁹

To sum up: in this paper I have shown that a pragmatist philosophy of history enables us synthesize the separated fields in the discipline into a workable theory of learning histories. In particular, it enables us to relate historical experience to the narrative, and the narrative to action. The connection between historical experience and narrative can be made by taking the narrative substance, or representation as an expression of an historical experience. The connection between the narrative and action can be established by taking the representation as a plan for action. Along these lines, and with the help of the classic philosophers of history, we envisage a new future for the philosophy of history.

⁸ Donald A. Schön, 'Generative Metaphor: A Perspective on Problem-Setting in Social Policy', in: Andrew Ortony, *Metaphor and Thought*, 1979, 262-266.

⁹ Jeroen Smit, *De prooi. Blinde Trots breekt ABN AMRO*, 2011.